

Touching the Earth

*The child's foot is not yet aware it's a foot,
and would like to be a butterfly or an apple.*

*But in time, stones and bits of glass,
streets, ladders,
and the paths in the rough earth
go on teaching the foot that it cannot fly,
cannot be a fruit bulging on the branch.
Then the child's foot
is defeated, falls
in the battle,
is a prisoner
condemned to live in a shoe.*

*Bit by bit, in that dark,
it grows to know the world in its own way,
out of touch with its fellow, enclosed,
feeling out life like a blind man.
(Pablo Neruda)*

As creatures suspended between heaven and earth, organized vertically in the field of gravity, we are dependent upon our two feet for support and propulsion. Our feet provide the understanding for our action in the world. Adapted to the demands of this task our feet are complex and wondrous instruments that dynamically connect us to the earth.

Each foot is comprised of twenty-six bones, thirty-one joints, numerous ligaments binding the bones, accessory bands and sheets of connective tissue and all the tendons attaching the twenty intrinsic muscles (originating from the bones of the foot itself) and dozen extrinsic muscles (originating from the bones of the leg above). The organization of these bones, joints, connective tissue and muscles in association with blood vessels, nerves and sensory organs (for pressure, pain, movement and position) allows the foot to mediate between the terrain of the ground below and the distribution of body weight and mass above. In accomplishing this role as mediator of above and below the foot acts as a sensory organ as well as an organ of support and mobility.

How effectively the feet accomplish their task is determined by the affordances and constraints created by their environment and use. When moving over a uniform surface, the joints that mitigate the angle of the foot relative to the ground (such as the subtalar and ankle joints) are not challenged and the muscles and sensory capacities that are associated with them are poorly developed. Feet locked in shoes have less opportunity than bare feet to receive stimulation provided by movement

over a richly varied landscape and can become rigid and dull.

The dullness that is the norm of civilized feet contributes to an upward bias in the movement of many people. When we lack a vital foundation structurally and perceptually, we attempt to hold ourselves up from above, creating tension in our shoulders, neck, and chest, which in turn restricts our breathing and overall fluency of movement. Being “ungrounded” in this way we are readily imbalanced. Our practices can provide the means for regrounding our movement and integrating the use of the feet with ourselves as a whole, as each one (Aikido, Tai Chi and Feldenkrais) provide the means to work consciously with our feet.

In Aikido the practice of moving on our knees as in *suwari waza* and *hanmi handachi* techniques stimulates and places specific demands on our feet that positively restructure them, strengthening and mobilizing the toes, arch and ankle. For this reason alone (and there are many others), the benefit of kneeling technique cannot be overestimated. It is also important to direct our attention to our feet as we do with the breathing exercise that involves raising up on the toes with inhalation and lowering the body with exhalation, imagining that we breath in and out through the soles of the feet. Through all aspects of our training we come to recognize that effective execution of any technique requires a firm connection to the earth.

In Tai Chi the fact that we move slowly affords us the chance to attend to precise details of our movement. Observing how we receive and transfer our weight onto and off of our feet directly influences our capacity to move with increased grace and stability. The fact that we sink into ourselves in the practice of form (pressing our center towards our feet) allows us to sense and make real the connection between our feet and our center, bringing greater power to our movement. As said in the Tai Chi Classics, “Power originates in the feet, is distributed through the legs, controlled by the waist, released through the spine and manifest in the fingertips.”

Moshe Feldenkrais developed many Awareness Through Movement Lessons that work directly with the feet, some directed towards heightening flexibility in the feet (resulting in the interlacing of ones toes) and some towards facilitating greater stability in standing and more efficient propulsion through the foot in walking, jumping and running. All ATM lessons increase our awareness that each part of us is dependent on its relationship to the whole in effecting efficient action.

To further awaken our feet, I recommend that each of us liberate our feet from our shoes often, run in the sand, squish through mud, caress the grass, avail them to hands (ours or others) for massage, soak them in hot water, splash in cold water and expose them to the warmth of the sun. If we demonstrate our appreciation for our feet maybe we can reciprocally bond more deeply with the earth and learn to walk lightly and lovingly upon her.

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